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## THE EPISODE OF OSCEOLA'S WIFE

FACT OR FICTION?

by KENNETH W. PORTER

One of the best-known stories connected with the Seminole War is that the intense hostility of Osceola, the young Indian leader whose name is known in this relationship almost to the exclusion of all others, was in large measure due to the seizure and carrying away into bondage of his young wife, whose mother was a runaway slave. This story is commonly found not only in Florida guide-books and popular accounts of the Seminole Indians,<sup>1</sup> but also in standard histories. It has come to be accepted as a fact requiring no special reference.<sup>2</sup>

What is the authority, if any, for this popular tale? The publications above-mentioned give none, and most of the more extended and substantial accounts are equally deficient in this respect. The standard work on the removal to the Indian Territory of the Five Civilized Tribes, including the Seminole, says:<sup>3</sup> "Osceola blamed Thompson [the Seminole agent] for the seizure of his young wife who was carried off into slavery." A footnote reference to the paragraph containing this statement, however, deals only with the murder of Thompson by Osceola in revenge for the latter's having been imprisoned at the former's orders, and does not refer to the episode which, in the usual accounts, is described as calling forth the burst of rage which resulted in Osceola's arrest.

Negro historians, naturally, take great interest in this episode. The most detailed history of the Negro in the

1. Johnson, Clifton, *Highways and byways of Florida*, N. Y., 1908, p. 152. American guide series. *Florida, a guide to the southernmost state*, N. Y., 1939, pp. 42-43. Works progress administration, *The Seminole Indians in Florida*, Tallahassee, 1940, p. 4. These are selected at random, as being ready to hand.
2. The present author has himself thus referred to it, without feeling the necessity of giving any authority. Porter, Kenneth Wiggins, "Florida slaves and free Negroes in the Seminole War, 1835-1842," *The Journal of Negro history*, xxviii (Oct., 1943), 407.
3. Foreman, Grant, *Indian removal*, Norman, Okla., 1932, p. 326.

United States<sup>4</sup> presents the usual story, but without giving any authority. An earlier history of the American Negro, by a member of that race, does, however, give not one but even two authorities for the usual story,<sup>5</sup> namely, McMaster and "M. M. Cohen as quoted in *Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine*, July, 1837." McMaster, however, as I had already ascertained before consulting Brawley, while he gives the usual story, presents no authority<sup>6</sup> - indeed he gives no authority whatsoever for the entire chapter dealing with the Seminole War - so one must resort to the other authority. Brawley probably derived this reference from Joshua R. Giddings' *The exiles of Florida*, published in 1858 as a propaganda work to arouse anti-slavery sentiment through reference to the events of the Seminole War, which was, indeed, to a considerable extent inspired by a desire to seize the Negroes who had taken refuge among the Florida Indians. Giddings, after presenting in rather flowery language the usual narrative,<sup>7</sup> adds in a foot-note: "Vide account of this transaction by M. M. Cohen, given in the *Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine*, vol. II, page 419." Brawley, it is interesting to note, was not content to rest on Giddings' authority-if we are correct in our assumption that it was from this well-known work that he derived the reference - but went directly to the periodical referred to, since he gives the *date*, while Giddings gave only the *volume*. The periodical account, somewhat abbreviated, is as follows: "Oceola . . . had a wife . . . whose mother was a mulatto slave, who ran away, was adopted by the Indians, and married one of their chiefs . . . Oceola's wife was seized as a slave" and her husband was ironed for trying to defend her. Brawley did not, however, check the reference further by seeking out the

4. Woodson, Carter G., *The Negro in our history*, Washington, 1927, p. 196. It is interesting to observe that this author not only states that Osceola's wife was half-Indian and half-Negro but also makes (p. 194) Osceola himself of the same racial mixture, as does another version of the story, that it was Osceola's mother who was seized and carried into Georgia as the daughter of a fugitive negress. vide, Jay, Wm. *A view of the action of the Federal government in behalf of slavery*. N. Y. 1839, p. 156.

5. Brawley, Benjamin, *A social history of the American Negro*, New York, 1921, p. 111.

6. McMaster, John B., *History of the people of the U. S.*, vi, 332.

7. pp. 98-99.

original account to which the periodical purportedly referred.

No one even slightly acquainted with the literature of the Seminole War can fail to recognize the name of M. M. Cohen, author of *Notices of Florida*,<sup>8</sup> a rather precious and plagiaristic book based partly on his brief experiences as an officer of South Carolina militia in the left wing of Gen. Scott's unsuccessful "Summer Campaign" and partly on both acknowledged and unacknowledged ransackings of publications on Florida by others, which was one of the first of a number of books purporting to present personal observations of the war. The difficulty -which in this writer's case amounts to impossibility- is in finding, even by the most diligent and frequent turnings of Lieut. Cohen's age-browned and age-brittled pages, any episode even remotely resembling that which the anti-slavery quarterly published on his alleged authority. Lieut. Cohen, as might have been expected from a Charlestonian, an officer in the South Carolina militia, was, indeed, a devout admirer of the Institution<sup>9</sup> under whose laws Osceola's wife was, allegedly, seized and returned to the slavery from which her mother had escaped, and it was this inconsistency between his known sentiments and his appearance as in some way a contributor to an anti-slavery periodical which eventually caused me to investigate somewhat further the authenticity of this anecdote.

Another possibility, however, presented itself. A personal narrative entitled *Sketch of the campaign*, also published in Charleston in 1836 under the anonymous authorship of "A lieutenant of the left wing," is sometimes ascribed, on the basis of similarities in episodes and style, to Lieut. Cohen, though apparently incorrectly. Could the editor of the anti-slavery quarterly have drawn the anecdote from this account? But a careful perusal, while it revealed much about Osceola, turned up nothing about his unfortunate wife.

The next alternative, and probably the correct one

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8. Charleston, 1836.

9. See p. 81.

though this is at present not susceptible of proof, is that the anti-slavery editor read or head the story *somewhere*, and confused its source, whatever it was, with the better known work of M. M. Cohen ; I can personally testify to the difficulty of keeping separate in one's memory the various narratives of the first year in the Seminole War. I consequently examined the principal of these, published prior to the date of the anti-slavery periodical, but to no avail. *The war in Florida* published anonymously in Baltimore, in 1836, by Woodburne Potter, does mention Osceola's imprisonment-for which, indeed, there is abundant evidence-but ascribes it to the Seminole's conduct in violently objecting to the agent's confiscation of a quantity of liquor! <sup>10</sup> John Lee Williams, an old resident of Florida, in a book published the same year as the note in the anti-slavery periodical, merely says that Osceola was arrested for flourishing a knife at a conference and ordering the whites out of Florida. <sup>11</sup>

The episode of the seizure of Osceola's wife thus rests, so far as I have been able to ascertain, upon no surer foundation than an anti-slavery periodical which gives as its authority a pro-slavery writer in whose only known published work it cannot be found! Is it, then, a deliberate fabrication? Probably not. If so, the editor would have ascribed it to "truthworthy information" or "A gentleman recently arrived from the Territory of Florida and well acquainted with the circumstances"-not to a well-known writer who would have been capable of denying the anecdote's ascription to him.

The *argumentem ad silentium*, though never entirely safe, is nevertheless of some importance. The ardently anti-slavery Giddings seems to have been a little perplexed by the failure of any other authority to mention a reason for Osceola's arrest other than his unspecifically motivated employment of outrageous language toward the agent. "Mr. Thompson, the agent," Giddings writes, "in his letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, . . . says: Powell [Osceola] used such language,

10. p. 76.

11. *The territory of Florida*, N. Y., 1837, p. 216.

that I was constrained to order him into irons.' Mr. Sprague, in his history of the Florida War, reiterates the statement of Mr. Thompson. But neither Sprague, nor Thompson, nor any other person who was present, it is believed, has ever *denied* [italics mine] the relation which Mr. Cohen has given." How Thompson-pierced by 15 bullets from the rifles of Osceola's band and his dead brains beaten out, in December, 1835-could have *denied* a "relation" which Cohen did not make until months later - or how Sprague, who, as an army officer, was probably not a constant reader of the anti-slavery press, could have been expected to encounter the "Cohen relation," Giddings does not explain. Capt. Sprague, a Northerner, wrote rather objectively, with full awareness of the wrongs of the Indians and of the conspicuous role of their Negroes in the conflict; if he had known of such an episode as Giddings mentions, he would probably have included it in his monumental history. A rather long article about Osceola, published only a little over two years after the end of the war, and written in a most sympathetic spirit, does not mention his wife.<sup>12</sup>

Osceola probably required no seizure of a part-Negro wife to inspire his hatred of the whites and his determination to fight them to the last on the soil of Florida. He was a Creek refugee from Georgia, and from boyhood had good reasons for hostility to the Americans, which probably was no greater, however, than that of Coacoochee, Sam Jones, Billy Bowlegs, and many other leaders, none of whom, so far as is known, had the reason for enmity ascribed to Osceola.

It should be kept in mind, however, that, whether or not Osceola had a part-Negro wife who was seized and returned to slavery, such an episode was easily within the bounds of possibility. Seminole Indians did have wives of Negro blood<sup>13</sup> and such wives, if descendants of slave-women, were legally slaves, regardless of how

12. Storrow, Thomas W., "Osceola, the Seminole war-chief," *Knickerbocker*, xxiv (Nov., 1844), 427-448.

13. One of head-chief Mikonopi's two wives was half-Negro (Cohen, 238). See also: 25th Cong., 3d sess., H. of R., War Dept, doc. 225, pp. 96, 123.

long they had lived in freedom among the Indians or how many children they had borne to Indian husbands— which children themselves, indeed, were also legally slaves. Numerous enquiries were addressed to the officers engaged in conducting the Seminole War, urging the locating and returning to slavery of Negro men and women believed to be living among the Indians, *with their increase*.<sup>14</sup> Whites even with no shadow of legal right to Negroes living among the Indians nevertheless frequently claimed and seized them. A case in point is that of the friendly chief Econchattemicco. A band of whites, taking advantage of the disturbed state of Florida on the eve and at the beginning of the Seminole War, descended on his settlement, seized the Negroes there, and carried them off to slavery in Georgia. Among those thus enslaved was the old chief's "Granddaughter (half Negro) stolen and carried away."<sup>15</sup>

It is thus certain that even a very prominent chief did have a granddaughter, if not a daughter, who was part-Negro, and that this granddaughter was not immune from seizure and sale as a slave. It is even of some interest, though perhaps of little actual significance, in this connection, that Osceola is said to have been related to Econchattemicco, one of whose wives was allegedly a sister of Osceola.<sup>16</sup>

Probably some such episode as the kidnaping of Econchattemicco's granddaughter came to the attention of the anti-slavery editor, perhaps already in association with the fascinating name and personality of Osceola, and was editorially confused with the best-known narrative, to date, of the Seminole War, that of Cohen. Unless an authoritative contemporary source is discovered, we shall have to admit that the episode of Osceola's wife rests on an unsupported assertion from a questionable source and probably did not actually occur in the form

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18, 57-58.

15. Brevard, Caroline, *History of Florida*, 2 vols., Deland, 1924, i, app. viii, 278-279, R. H. Stewart, Chattahoochee, May 25, 1836, to Gen. Call.

16. [Welch, Andrew], *A narrative of the early days and remembrances of Osceola Nikkanoochee*, London, 1841, pp. 21, 65. My opinion of the authenticity of this work is not high.

stated. But we must also admit that the widespread acceptance of the story-which is unlikely to be affected by this article-is to a considerable extent justified by the general situation and circumstances of the Seminole Indians and Negroes at that time, which immediately lent to the anecdote a high degree of possibility and credibility and caused it for more than a century, so far as I can ascertain, generally to go unquestioned.